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AUTHOR Cross, John B.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study determined the effects of Whole Language Immersion, a pedagogy rooted in Whole Language and English as a Second Language on two sections of eleventh-grade students in Sumter County, Alabama, defined as at-risk by the Alabama Exit Examination. For 10 weeks, the control group was taught grammar while the experimental group underwent language immersion by daily reading, writing, and speaking. Four quantitative measures were used in pre/post forms to evaluate growth in students' lingual abilities: the Alabama High School Basic Skills Exit Exam, a writing sample, a cloze test, and an attitude inventory. Three dimensions were evaluated in the writing samples: syntactic fluency (T-Units); coherence (NAEP scale), and analytic (Diederich scale). Rich qualitative data in the form of daily classroom observations were also recorded. Analysis of the data indicated significant growth in language ability in both control and experimental groups with no significant differences between mean gain of groups. Informal observations indicated increases of frequency in reading and writing in the experimental group. Although no student had previously completed reading a novel, by the end of the experiment, all students had finished from one to five books. Observed discipline problems diminished as students learned to work cooperatively. Students began to revise for diction, syntax, and audience, and internalized rules of Standard English grammar without direct instruction. Contains 11 references. (Author/TB)

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Effects of Whole Language Immersion (WLI) on At-Risk Secondary Students

John B. Cross, June Westbrook, and Patricia Dueitt-Jones

University of West Alabama

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of Whole Language Immersion, a pedagogy rooted in Whole Language and English as a Second Language on two sections of eleventh-grade students, defined as at-risk by the Alabama Exit Examination. For ten weeks, the control group was taught grammar while the experimental group underwent language immersion by daily reading, writing, and speaking.

Four quantitative measures were used in pre/post forms to evaluate growth in students' lingual abilities: the Alabama High School Basic Skills Exit Exam, a writing sample, a cloze test, and an attitude inventory. Three dimensions were evaluated in the writing samples: syntactic fluency (T-Units); coherence (NAEP scale), and analytic (Diederich scale). Rich qualitative data in the form of daily classroom observations were also recorded.

Analysis of data indicated significant growth in language ability in both control and experimental groups with no significant differences between mean gain of the groups.

Informal observations indicated increases of frequency in reading and writing in the experimental group. Although no student had previously completed a novel, by the end of the experiment, all students had finished between one and five books. Observed discipline problems diminished as students learned to work cooperatively. Students began to revise for diction, syntax, and audience, and internalized rules of Standard English grammar without direct instruction.

Effects of Whole Language Immersion (WLI) on At-risk Secondary Students

Although copious research (summarized by Hillocks, 1986) has invalidated the bottom-up, skills-based model of language acquisition, that model dominates instruction in many English classes. In many cases, students are instructed in "grammar" in isolation from the writing, reading, and speaking contexts that make such study meaningful. At best, the worksheet approach to language is neutral: White (1965), Whitehead (1966), and Sullivan (1969) concluded that traditional grammar made no difference in the writing ability of students. At worst, the misconceptions of school authorities often place at-risk students in remedial classes where they are subjected to massive doses of grammar drill. Ames (1992) suggests that this practice of remediation may have deleterious effects by forcing students to do assignments at which they are not proficient and will likely fail again, reinforcing a negative self-image and increasing the gap between themselves and "regular" students. Since at-risk students seem to see little relevance in traditional grammar, they resist instruction and often create discipline problems in doing so. Moreover, since at-risk students have successfully resisted the skill-and-drill approach for their entire lives, it is doubtful that one more semester of it will do the trick.

Goodman (1992), Smith (1986), and Weaver (1979) state that language learning is holistic, top-down rather than bottom-up. In keeping with a Whole Language model, we believe that language learning (1) is best when students are active, not passive; (2) implies student input into the curriculum; (3) must be kept whole; (4) is mostly subconscious and occurs during applications; and (5) must be meaningful.

Design

Our project draws on both Whole Language and ESL (English as a Second Language) models. The first, Whole Language, is an emergent pedagogy which has been shown to be effective in early childhood education. However, little substantial research has been done on its utility in secondary grades, and less yet with at-risk students. The second source, ESL, provides models for teaching Standard English to students with other home languages, a description we contend fits Black Dialect. Smitherman (1976) and others have shown that Black Dialect is not a

"substandard" form of speech but a cohesive, coherent form of communication with its own predictable rules and patterns. However, since students must learn Standard English to succeed in the world, our model incorporates an intensive immersion in its workings.

Questions guiding the study were: (1) Does WLI result in measurable growth in reading and writing at the secondary level? (2) Is WLI an effective pedagogy for at-risk students?

Method

Participants and setting

The study involved two 11th grade groups, designated at-risk by failing scores on the Fall 1994 Alabama Exit Exam. Since Livingston High School had only one such group, it was decided to use a population at Sumter County High in York, nine miles from Livingston because of similar socioeconomic conditions. Both schools serve students from Sumter county, a rural area in West Central Alabama. Both schools are predominantly African-American, and all students in the study were African-American. The study lasted ten weeks (the time between the fall and spring administrations of the Exit Exam, one of the study's measures).

In addition to the Exit Exam, three measures were taken before instruction began: an attitude survey (Estes, 1971), a writing sample, and a cloze test. At the end of the study, the same measures were used as posttests.

The York group, an intact class of 23 students, was designated as the control and received instruction in traditional grammar, mechanics, and usage. Instruction was teacher-centered, and relied on the assigned text and worksheets. Students were assessed by teacher-made grammar tests.

The Livingston group, also an intact class of 17 students, underwent no instruction in traditional grammar. Instead, class activities involved immersing students in language, providing daily, meaningful opportunities to use language in reading, speaking, and writing situations. Although many Whole Language supporters advocate a child-centered curriculum, we decided that the at-risk population needed some structure, though with minimum teacher direction. Early in the study, all students were given Robert Lipsyte's The Contender, a young adult novel whose

protagonist is similar in age, race, and socioeconomic status to the students in the study. Students were prepared for the text with a discussion, and the teacher read the first chapter orally. After this, each class period began with 20 minutes of SSR (silent sustained reading) in that novel. A flexible schedule was devised: Monday, freewriting, brainstorming on writing topics; Tuesday, oral reading, drafting on topic individually; Wednesday, peer revision with attention to content, form, and mechanics; Thursday, revision and submission of final writing; Friday, student presentations (oral readings of their work). Final papers were read by the teacher and returned during individual conferences. In addition, each student maintained a portfolio with an analysis chart detailing sources of repeated errors.

Instruments

The Alabama State Exit Exam (CTB Macmillan/McGraw-Hill) is a criterion referenced multiple-choice measure designed to test competence of "basic skills" in reading, language, and math. The Exam is given twice a year in Alabama, and students must achieve 70% or better in each section of the test in order to graduate from high school.

Writing samples, pre and post, were taken from each student. Students were given a list of five topics with potential for personal relevance and asked to write for the duration of the 50 minute class period. Essays were assigned random numbers and evaluated for T-Units (Hunt, 1965), coherence (NAEP, 1980), analytic scale (Diederich, 1974). Three readers read each essay, and scores were averaged for each paper. Readers were calibrated before beginning evaluation.

To determine change in student attitude, The Estes Scale (1971) was adapted to include writing as well as reading. It was administered in pre and post forms.

A cloze test was also given, using excerpts from a seventh-grade social studies text.

Results

Pretest and posttest scores from the State Exit Exam, cloze, attitudinal survey, and writing samples were analyzed by t-test. Both the control and the experimental group showed significant gains on the language portion of the Exit Exam at the .05 level; however, there was no significant difference between the mean growth of the two groups. Statistical analyses of data from the

reading portion of the Exit Exam, cloze, writing sample, and attitudinal survey revealed no significant change from pre to post or differences between the groups.

Table 1

High School Basic Skills Exit Exam: Language

Number, Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Values

Group	N	M	SD	t	p
Control Pre	21	54.81	5.95		
Control Post	21	62.15	9.18		
Total				3.41	<0.05
Experimental Pre	16	56.13	5.60		
Experimental Post	16	62.31	13.42		
Total				1.70	<0.05

Discussion

Both the control and experimental groups showed significant gain in language as measured by the Exit Exam. Although the analysis of data indicates no significant difference between control and experimental groups, it is noteworthy that the experimental group did as well as the control group on the State Exit Exam without any direct instruction in grammar, mechanics, or usage. Since the exam is a multiple choice measure intending to determine writing proficiency solely by these means, it seems likely that both models of curriculum and instruction were effective. Since a main argument for direct grammar instruction is the need for students to "pass the test," Whole Language Immersion seems as effective in this regard as worksheets and drill.

Also, rich qualitative data reveals positive developments in the experimental class. At the beginning of the experiment, no student had read a book. Ten weeks later, one student had finished five novels, several had read three, and everyone in the group had completed one book.

Discipline problems, rampant earlier in the year, diminished greatly as students learned to work cooperatively. Before the experiment began, students had to be constantly reminded to stay on task and complete worksheets. Five weeks later, we noted in the teacher's field notes that "everyone worked on task as usual." Also, we informally observed a dramatic improvement in discipline and increased interest in the English class. Freed from irrelevant isolated drill, students began to enjoy "writing different," as they called the process, and interacted positively as they practiced peer editing.

Although the class had become involved in a regular process of reading and writing, several students expressed concern that they weren't learning the "skills" necessary to pass the Exit Exam. The teacher responded that they were learning these skills by daily use, an explanation that seemed to meet skepticism, since these students had known only a skill and drill approach and accepted this method as the only path to learning. We noted, however, that students became much more adept at catching errors in mechanics and usage in peer review, and that their revisions became more holistic as the experiment continued. In fact, the teacher of the experimental group initially expressed strong reservations about WLI and doubted that the method could help her students pass the Exit Exam. By the end of the experiment, she became sufficiently convinced to use the method in her ninth grade class as well as in the experimental group.

Conclusions

Although the similarity of mean gain rate on the Exit Exam suggests that WLI is valid pedagogy for at risk students, the duration of the treatment was too brief and the N too small to support a general conclusion. Since writing growth occurs slowly with practice and maturation, it is not surprising that writing samples showed no significant growth. A replication of the study, lasting at least a year and with a larger number of participants, might yield more valid results.

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